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ABSTRACT

Community-based early intervention strategies can provide students with skills and attitudes that make dropping out of high school an unnecessary choice. This report analyzes the high school dropout phenomenon in terms of its magnitude, influence on minority populations, and need for local outreach programs. In California, the dropout rate has increased 100 percent since 1970. One in 3 high school students do not graduate, and among minorities, the ratio increases to 5 out of 10. Causes of high dropout rates among minorities include language problems and teacher inability to deal with cultural differences. In an opinion study of predominantly white California elementary teachers, 37 percent reported no cultural awareness workshops relevant to their Black and Hispanic students' backgrounds during the last three years. Local dropout prevention facilities designed to provide remediation, survival skill training, and academic tutoring for secondary students were established through private initiative, but it became evident that students needed assistance before attaining high school status. Consequently, a proposal for an early intervention dropout program was written, and this program, funded by the San Bernardino City Council and assisted by volunteers, provided enhancement support for 130 elementary students for 6 months. Students demonstrated marked improvement in the program's academic disciplines. This program's success suggests that intervention should commence at the elementary level through local collaboration. (CJH)

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Halting Dropouts: To Be or Not To Be

There Is No Question

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Running Head: Halting Dropouts

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the dropout epidemic and the societal threat of a permanent, unemployable underclass. The dropout constitutes a loseout for all of society. The author discusses the magnitude of the problem, its impact on minority populations, culture-teacher interaction, and cites an effective community-based educational supplement designed to combat dropout activity.

HALTING DROPOUTS: TO BE OR NOT TO BE, THERE IS NO QUESTION!

The magnitude of the high school dropout problem is well documented. According to researchers, the national dropout rate among secondary school students range from 26% to 50% in some urban centers (Maurer, 1982), to 75% in other urban communities. Educators, politicians, and social reformers all agree that the dropout problem is at the heart of such social ills as escalating crime rates and welfare costs as well as family instability and unemployment.

A report to the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Equal Educational Opportunity states that dropouts are more likely to become economic burdens to society and the public will pay heavily in increased taxes to support welfare programs, to fight crime, and to maintain special programs for the high proportion of youth who drop out of school. The 1980 Census Bureau figures, for example, indicate the unemployment rate for high school dropouts jumped from 19% at the end of 1970 to 25.3% at the end of 1980; conversely, unemployment rates for high school graduates rose only 2.4%, from 11.5% to 13.9%. The dropout rate among minority youth is particularly significant in urban areas. Census Bureau figures indicate 85% of the Hispanics and 75% of the Blacks reside in metropolitan areas where the highest dropout and crime rates occur. It is important to note that while the government spends approximately $2,500 in Average Daily Attendance costs, it costs approximately $28,000 to keep an individual incarcerated.

THE ILLITERATE DROPOUT

The National Commission on Excellence (1983) found that at least 23 million adult Americans "by the simplest tests of everyday reading, writing, and comprehension" can be characterized as functionally illiterate. Historian Boorstin, head of the Library of Congress, in a report to Congress, noted that the number of illiterates was not shrinking, but growing by 2.3 million individuals per year. Most of these individuals are poor, school dropouts, and work at menial jobs. The prospects of improving their conditons are disheartening. The dropout problem has become so pervasive that educators and legislators are diverting millions of dollars to seek problematic solutions.

THE DROPOUT PROBLEM IN CALIFORNIA

California statistics are cited because of the availability of data; however, the dropout problem is one of national concern and perhaps the data can be generalized to other states.

A California Department of Education report (1984) indicates the dropout rate in California has increased 100% since 1970 which makes the State's rate 25% above the national average (Assembly Office of Research, 1985). One in three high school students do not graduate, and for minorities, the ratio increases to five students out of ten. The Assembly report further states:

> California has an enormous high school dropout problem which crosses all ethnic and geographic barriers. If left unchecked, the large numbers of high school drop-

outs entering adult life with poor basic academic skills will undermine the economic growth of California.

In a study of the student dropout rate in the Los Angeles School District, the researchers say the primary focus for retention must be on identifying students who exhibit characteristics of potential dropouts and on providing effective guidance counseling services that will prevent them from droping out of school.

DEFINITION OF A DROPOUT

Accurate data collection has been difficult, in part, because there has been no commonly accepted definition of a dropout. In an effort to collect annual dropout information from all high schools beginning in the Fall of 1986, the California State Department of Education presented the following definition to help alleviate the definitional discrepancies:

> A dropout is any student who has been enrolled in grade 10, 11, or 12 but who left school prior to graduation or the completion of a formal education, or legal equivalent, and who did not within 45 days, enter another public or private educational institution or school program, as documented by a written request for a transcript from that institution. (CSDE,1986)

STUDENT ATTRITION

Ambiguity exists relative to the definition of student attrition versus student dropout. Student attrition figures are easier to compile and form the basis for much dropout statistical

data. The Richmond Unified School District offers the following definition for attrition:

> Student attrition is defined as students who enrolled in a school and for some reason left the school before the completion of the school year. (CSDE, 1986)

Therefore, a student included in attrition data, not verified as enrolled in another school or program, becomes a dropout.

THE PLIGHT OF MINORITIES

California's school-age population is becoming minority faster than the general population because of both higher birth rates among minorities and immigration into California of young minority families. A March 1986 California Postsecondary Education Commission report states that minority school-age youths increased from 25% in 1967 to 40% by 1979, and are expected to represent 48% and 52% of the population by the years 1990 and 2000 respectively. However, the attrition rate for minorities is disproportionately high, and in too many cases, the gap continues to widen between majority and minority school populations. Table 1 shows the disparity between the percentage of minority and majority school dropouts in selected southern California regions. The spiralling dropout rate has also caused much concern in institutions of higher education. Relatively few minorities enroll in colleges and university and even fewer remain to graduate (see Table 2).

Insert Table 1 about here

Insert Table 2 about here

The causes of high dropout rates among minorities are continously researched and debated. A March 1984 report by the California State University Educational Policy Committee cites possible factors that impact the high dropout rate: incomplete and inadequate academic preparation, language problems, the environment of the inner-city schools which most Blacks and Hispanics attend, teacher inability to understand nd deal with cultural differences, and economic hardships are among the reasons most frequently given.

Statistics show that minorities are also frequently disproportionately expelled from school. For instance, in the "Summary of Action by Ethnic Group 1985-86 School year" Board of Education Report, the San Bernardino Unified School District lists the disposition of students referred for expulsion. The rate of actual expulsions was Black, 48%; Hispanic, 41%; Indian, 25%; Asian, 16%; and other,27%.

CULTURE AND TEACHER PERCEPTIONS

As an instructor of cross-cultural counseling, this researcher perceived cultural variables to be vital in the formation of student achievement and self-concept, positive teacher interaction, and possible student attrition. Also validating the importance of culture, graduate students complained of inadequate preparation for the "reality shock" of student diversity in the classroom. As a result, this researcher conducted a Teacher

Opinion Survey (TOS) among San Bernardino Elementary School District teachers. The city elementary schools have a 56% minority student population. Questionnaires were disseminated to 275 teachers in eleven elementary schools with large minority enrollments. Teachers were queried on their attitudes about career preparedness, cultural factors, and knowledge of diverse ethnic and cultural values. Although the survey was conducted during the last month of school, the educators' interests were high as indicated by the 33% return rate. A detailed analysis of cross-tabulated data will be released in a forthcoming article.

Teachers reported that although 60% of the students were Black and Hispanic, 72% of the teachers were Caucasion; 17% knew "very few" of their students' parents; and 37% reported no cultural awareness workshops during the last 3 years. Forty-three percent (43%) were dissatisfied with their preparedness for working with the culturally diverse student; however, only 20% felt workshops would be beneficial. Next to "paperwork", the thing LEAST liked about their teaching assignment was "problem students." Responding to an inquiry about increasing parental involvement, one teacher wrote, "tie in there A.F.D.C. requirements, usually peredominately middle class parents are involved." (sic)

RESEARCHER TO PRACTITIONER

With a belief that one person CAN make a difference, and a desire to move from rhetoric to action, this researcher formed a non-profit corporation, Provisional Educational Services,

Incorporated, and wrote an sought funding for two dropout prevention proposals: Operation RETAIN (Rescue Educational Training and Initiative Now),for secondary students, and Project Early Outreach for elementary students. A facility was secured on the Westside of San Benardino, an area comprised of 91% Blacks and Mexican-Americans. Forty-three percent of the households within the area report incomes below the poverty level, and youth unemployment runs as high as 62%. Volunteers washed and repaired windows, walls, and floors; painted the entire facility; and improved and landscaped the grounds. This community-based facility,named the Provisional Accelerated Learning (PAL) Center, provides an educational support system in a non-threatening environment.

Part of the impetus for opening the PAL Center was based on a 1984 San Bernardino Unified School District report which stated that 48.2% of the high school students were receiving less-than-C averages, and/or failing in at least one course. Another significant factor was that during that academic year, the largest number of students leaving school were expelled or placed on long-term suspensions because of behavioral infractions. These students were considered by this researcher as being prime dropout candidates. This premise is validated by research which has shown a high positive correlation between low academic achievement and disruptive behavior. Beck and Muia (1980) found the potential dropout's characteristics included:

low self-esteem, little desire for self-growth, an un-

satisfactory relationship with his/her family, of low socio-economic status, often forms friendships with others like himself/herself, displays feelings of alienation from society in general, academic failure, and delinquent behavior.

OPERATION RETAIN

RETAIN was designed to provide educational remediation, counseling, and survival skill training to high-risk potential dropout students. Services at the PAL Center included individualized academic tutoring, competency test preparation, English as a Second Language (ESL), Spanish as a Second Language (SSL), computeracy literacy, and related activities. Sensitivity and motivation were key elements of the learning process at the Pal Center. The staff was culturally relevant, sensitive, provided individualized attention, and encouraged a high level of parental involvement. As a result of the funding agency's criteria, Operation RETAIN serviced mostly secondary school students.

EARLY INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

Although the efficacy of the secondary program was demonstrated, it became evident that students needed help before attaining high school status and that intervention strategies must be implemented at the elementary level. According to the California Postsecondary Education Commission's Director's Report, (1985), the three critical periods when most dropouts decide to leave school are (1) during junior high school, (2) at

about age 16, and (3) just before high school graduation. The report further states:

> Their academic preparation for high school had begun in the elementary schools where most educators feel that students' habits, interests, and attitudes toward schooling are formed. By the middle-school years, many students had already developed the reading and computational skills, study habits, self assurance,and support groups of family and friends needed to adjust successfully to the increasing demands of the junior high school years....Simply the size and complexity of junior high school can be confusing and intimidating...Based on their experiences thus far, more than a few had already decided that school was not for them.

After a perusal of these and other disheartening reports, observations, and needs assessments, this writer felt that retention strategies must be initiated early in the student's career when preparation, encouragement, and motivation can be most effective in raising the aspiration levels of youth. Consequently, an early-intervention, dropout prevention proposal entitled Project Early Outreach was written. Funded by the San Bernardino City Council to provide tutoring, counseling, and enhancement support to 60 elementary students for six months, 130 student youngsters enrolled in the program. Pre and Post California Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) scores were evaluated. Because of time constraints, three basic skills tests were admi-

nistered in one sitting.Nevertheless, students showed remarkable growth. Sixty-nine percent (69%) of the students tested showed significant growth in reading; 69% significantly improved in Language; and 50% improved in Mathematics, the last test administered. All students, who attended more than one week, showed growth in at least one skill area. Most improved in all three academic disciplines. During oral interviews by an outside evaluator, 100% of the students said the PAL Center had helped them for "regular school." In addition, parents'comments were noteworthy:

> "You have been able to stimulate ___ in a way that public school has not...thank you, thank you, thank you. With educators like yourselves and parents who care, the future holds incredible promise for our children." L.J.
>
> "...She hated school and wanted to b a second grade dropout. Her attitude toward school was very negative. Since the PAL Center has worked with her on a one-on-one basis, she has realized that learning can be knowledgeable and fun." A.M.

Hechinger (1986) concurs with the early intervention concept:

> Experiments have shown that early childhood education of high quality can give children the skills and attitudes needed for success in school and life. Sending students to high school without such skills and attituded virtually forces them to drop out, first out of school and later out of society.

Success at the PAL Center is the result of hard work and dedication by salaried and non-salaried personnel, students from California State University, students from Southern Illinois University at March Air Force Base, and community volunteers. All have given continued support to this community-based educational effort. The merit of community-based supplemental education will also be addressed in a forthcoming article by this writer.

CONCLUSION

Concern over the spiralling dropout rate has prompted school educators and politicians to initiate numerous activities to address the problem. We all realize the critical educational needs of our youth. The dropout rate continues to escalate and no one entity can effectively address all the factors that impact. There MUST be a collaborative effort by all concerned organizations, groups, and individuals. To this end, the PAL Center was organized and has been an effective support mechanism for educational retention. The pressing needs of our youth must supersede politics or individual ideologies. THE DROPOUT RATE MUST BE HALTED!

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TABLE 1

ATTRITION RATES FOR HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS

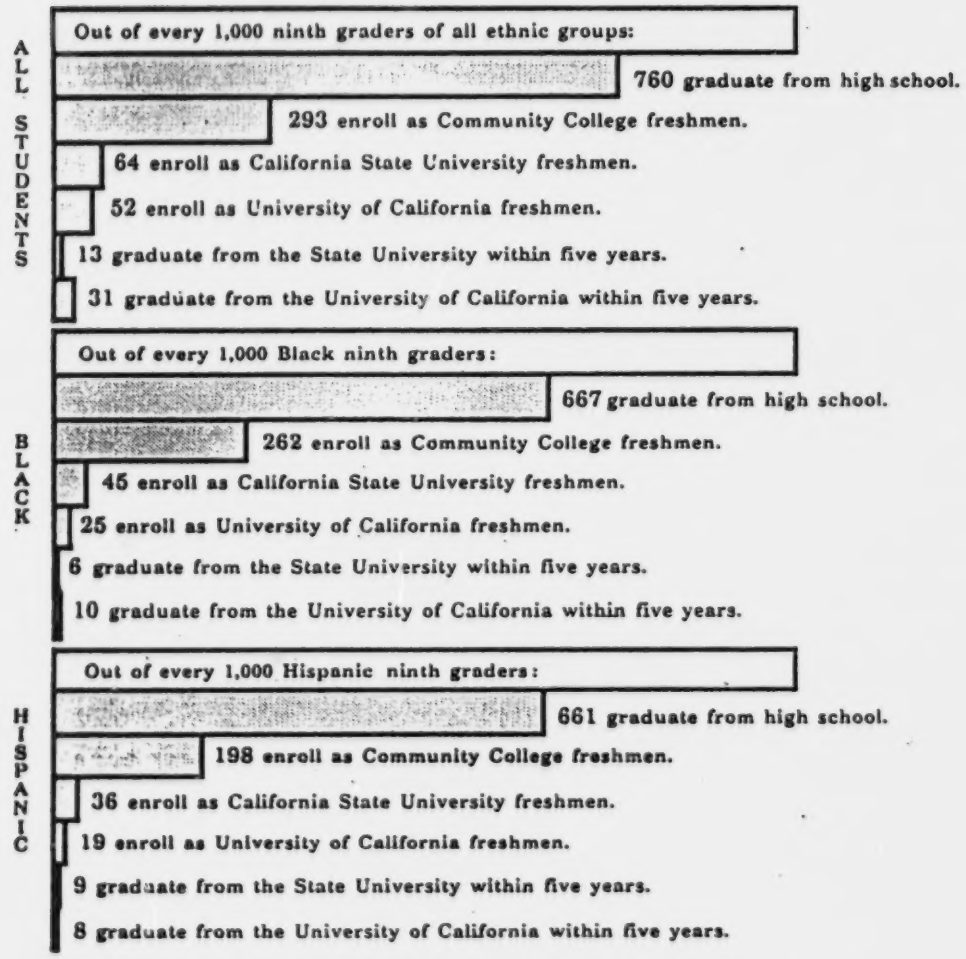
The attrition rate figures below are of tenth graders enrolled in 1981-82 and who graduated in June, 1984.

	Total Percent	BLACK	HISPANIC	WHITE	ASIAN	FILIPINO
STATE	30%	42%	42%	25%	14%	18%
COUNTY						
San Bernardino	33%	42	44	29	11.4	*
Los Angeles	39%	50	46	31	34	36
Riverside	35%	50	46	31	34	36
SCHOOLS IN SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY						
San Bernardino City	20%	30%	30	15	*	*
Redlands	14	51	36	7	*	*
Chino	46	50	51	43	50	*
Rialto	42	41	45	39	*	*
Colton	28	14	24	33	*	*
Fontana	42	*	*	11	*	*
Baker Valley	47%					

* Reliable data not available
Source: California Basic Educational Data System

TABLE 2

Fewer Black and Hispanic students graduate from high school, enroll in college, and graduate from the State's public universities than most students.


ALL STUDENTS
Out of every 1,000 ninth graders of all ethnic groups:
760 graduate from high school.
293 enroll as Community College freshmen.
64 enroll as California State University freshmen.
52 enroll as University of California freshmen.
13 graduate from the State University within five years.
31 graduate from the University of California within five years.
BLACK
Out of every 1,000 Black ninth graders:
667 graduate from high school.
262 enroll as Community College freshmen.
45 enroll as California State University freshmen.
25 enroll as University of California freshmen.
6 graduate from the State University within five years.
10 graduate from the University of California within five years.
HISPANIC
Out of every 1,000 Hispanic ninth graders:
661 graduate from high school.
198 enroll as Community College freshmen.
36 enroll as California State University freshmen.
19 enroll as University of California freshmen.
9 graduate from the State University within five years.
8 graduate from the University of California within five years.

Source: California Postsecondary Education Commission staff analysis of California State Department of Education data on 1979-80 ninth graders and 1982-83 high school graduates, State University and University of California reports on retention and five-year graduation rates, and Commission data on postsecondary enrollments and degrees granted.

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